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FM AMEMBASSY PRETORIA

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1103

INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE

RUEHTN/AMCONSUL CAPE TOWN 7543

RUEH DU/AMCONSUL DURBAN 1608

RUEHJO/AMCONSUL JOHANNESBURG 9898

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC

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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICANS COMMEMORATE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF  
FAMOUS DE KLERK SPEECH

11. (SBU) F. W. de Klerk, the last presidential leader under the apartheid state, stunned the world on February 2, 1990 by announcing his plans for the unconditional release of Nelson Mandela and the unbanning of liberation movements such as the African National Congress (ANC), Pan-African Congress, and South African Communist Party. De Klerk's speech, now 20 years old, gave the world joy, fear, and -- most importantly -- hope for change. South Africans remembered the 20th anniversary of the speech on February 2 and de Klerk used the anniversary for a rare public reflection on his legacy.

12. (SBU) The hundreds of history books on South Africa's transition to democracy cover the reasons for de Klerk's decision and the reactions both from the apartheid regime and the various liberation movements fighting for democracy. What is clear from these records is that de Klerk told few individuals outside of his inner circle that he planned to release Mandela and unban the groups formerly labeled as "terrorists." When he made the announcement, most of the domestic and international world was surprised. One political commentator remarked in the Sunday Times recently that he had been assigned to cover the speech for a newspaper and almost chose not to attend because "those speeches were all the same." He laughed about what would have happened he had missed the speech. Nine days after de Klerk's famous address, Mandela walked out of prison a free man, and six months later the ANC "suspended" the armed struggle against the state.

13. (SBU) Numerous ordinary South Africans in recent days have reflected on weblogs and in telephone interviews about the day of the speech and their lives after de Klerk's famous address. Some South Africans, both white and black, talked about the world that was lost. Others talked about how quickly South Africa has become a non-racial, non-sexist state. Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who was married to Nelson Mandela at the time of his release and is now the ANC Women's League President, relived the day on a radio interview on February 2. She recalled how the police informed her about de Klerk's speech while she was attending the funeral of her grandson's father. She said the family was told to make arrangements to "fetch Mandela from prison on February 11, 1990." She famously met Mandela at the prison and walked with him as he greeted thousands of South African citizens. De Klerk, in a separate radio interview, recalled how the news was received in Parliament. He said, "The news literally shook the room and the nation. Opposition parties in Parliament were stunned." He explained that only Foreign Minister Pik Botha and Minister of Law and Order Adriaan Volk had advance copies of what de Klerk would announce. He said, "We informed the whole Cabinet only right before the speech." When the interview asked de Klerk how he felt about he decision, the former President said he was convinced he was

doing what was best for the country and added that his decision was reaffirmed by the success of the 1992 whites-only referendum, in which he was given a mandate to negotiate with the ANC.

¶4. (SBU) De Klerk does not often speak publicly about his legacy, but the 20th anniversary of the speech gave him an opportunity to reflect. His foundation, the F. W. de Klerk Foundation, released a statement written by the former leader that said, "For white South Africans, the announcements of February 2, 1990 signaled their willingness to end centuries of alienation and division by abandoning the dominant position they held for more than 300 years. For black South Africans, it heralded the dawn of a new age of dignity, equality, and full political rights for which they had struggled for so long." De Klerk added, "For the world, these historic events showed that even the most intractable disputes could be resolved peacefully by negotiations and good will."

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Regardless of how South Africans living in 1990 viewed the world then, their views since that time have been shaped by what de Klerk announced 20 years ago. Even though de Klerk has not spoken frequently in recent years about the impact of his speech, his actions that day changed the course of South African history and marked the beginning of the end of the long struggle against apartheid, and opened the door to a very different future. End Comment.  
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